



# Political ignorance & policy preference

Eric Crampton  
University of Canterbury



# What do we know?

- Know US House majority party
  - 69% know it
- Can name their member of Congress
  - 46% know it
- Know term of House is 2 years
  - 30% know it
- Can name one of their state senators
  - 28% know it

Source: Dye and Zeigler



# Why should we care?

- Ignorance doesn't matter if:
  - Errors are unbiased
  - Effective cueing mechanisms exist  
(Lupia & McCubbins)
    - Voter can correctly perceive a third party to have common interests and necessary knowledge OR
    - Can use external factors to substitute for lack of knowledge about third party

“Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.”

H.L. Mencken



# Is ignorance unbiased?

- If political ignorance has predictive power after controlling for demographics, it's not unbiased.
- If the effect of ignorance isn't attenuated by cue availability, Lupia's solution doesn't help.

# Is ignorance unbiased?

$$Ig = \alpha_1 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \varepsilon_1$$

$$Pol = \alpha_2 + \theta_1 Ig + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \varepsilon_2$$

$$Econ = \alpha_3 + \theta_1 Ig + \beta_1 X' + \beta_2 Z + \varepsilon_3$$

$$Vote = \alpha_4 + \theta_1 Ig + \gamma_1 Econ + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 Z + \varepsilon_4$$

$$Pol = \alpha_5 + \theta_1 Ig + \theta_2 Ig * Cue + \beta_1 X'' + \beta_2 Z' + \varepsilon_5$$

$$Econ = \alpha_6 + \theta_1 Ig + \theta_2 Ig * Cue + \beta_1 X''' + \beta_2 Z' + \varepsilon_6$$

$$Vote = \alpha_7 + \theta_1 Ig + \theta_2 Ig * Cue + \gamma_1 Econ + \beta_1 X'' + \beta_2 Z' + \varepsilon_7$$



# Method

- NZES provides five broad measures of ignorance:
  - Left-right party positioning
  - MMP and consistency checks
  - Quiz questions on Parliament
  - Who was in last government
  - Knowing own MP and MP's party



# NZ: What do we know?

## ...basic facts about Parliament

- Parliament 3 year term 83%
- Enrolling to vote is compulsory 68%
- Non-citizens can vote 28%
- Can name own MP and Party 56%
- Party vote most important? 56%
- Representation threshold? 56%
- MMP more proportional than FPTP? 54%



# What don't we know?

...who formed the last govt

- Labour 83%
- Green 41%
- Progressive 39%
- United Future 27%
- Labour/Progressive 38%
- Labour/Progressive/UF 19%





# NZ: What do we know?

...Ideology

- Can place both National and Labour on a left-right axis: **79%**
  - Correctly? 81% (**64%** of overall sample)
- Can place Nat, Lab, and UF: **64%**
  - Correctly? 95% (**60%** of overall sample)

Extracted from New Zealand Election Survey 2005

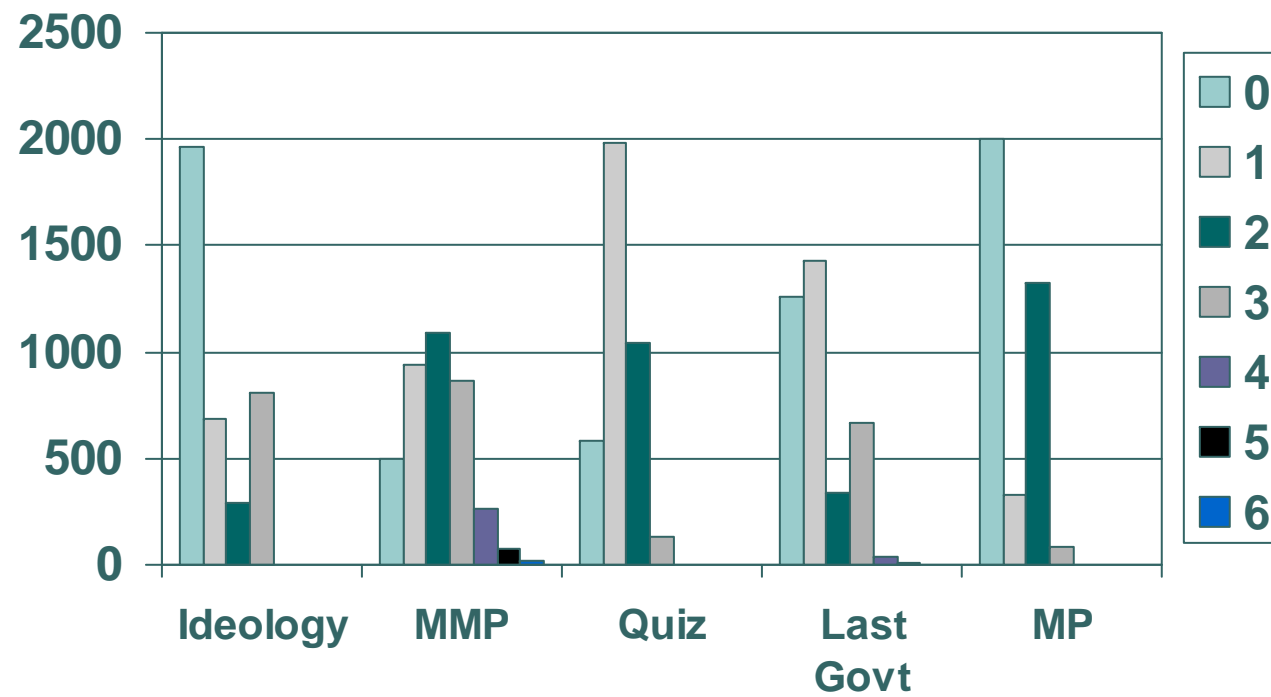


# Method

- Generate each ignorance variable, adding one point for each incorrect answer
- Aggregate variables by:
  - Sum
  - Sum of z-scores
  - Principal component analysis



# Ignorance measures





# Explaining ignorance

## ...highlights

- Interest in politics, seeking out news reduce ignorance; newspaper and internet most effective
- Ignorance decreasing in age
- University education and farming each reduce ignorance by about half s.d.
- Gender, ethnicity, income matter
- Not placing self on right-left index, right-wing ideology both increase ignorance.

**Table 2: Correlates of ignorance**

<b>Lack of interest in politics</b> (1=very interested; 4= not at all)	0.117 [5.01]**
<b>Seek out news about politics?</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.1 [2.56]*
<b>Pay no attention to political news</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.252 [4.42]**
<b>Have internet</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.12 [3.31]**
<b>Follow political news in newspaper</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.112 [1.65]
<b>Follow political news in newspaper</b> (1=once per week; 7=every day)	-0.026 [3.43]**
<b>Member community service group</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.179 [3.71]**
<b>Age</b> (years)	-0.032 [5.69]**
<b>gender of respondent</b> (0=female, 1=male)	-0.228 [7.19]**
<b>Some tertiary education</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.133 [3.81]**
<b>University educated</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.387 [8.49]**
<b>Technical occupation</b> (0=no, 1=yes, manual labour omitted)	-0.294 [4.44]**
<b>Clerical occupation</b> (0=no, 1=yes, manual labour omitted)	-0.328 [4.83]**
<b>Service occupation</b> (0=no, 1=yes, manual labour omitted)	-0.218 [3.43]**
<b>Farming occupation</b> (0=no, 1=yes, manual labour omitted)	-0.41 [4.56]**
<b>Parents expressed political preference</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.147 [4.65]**
<b>European ethnicity</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.105 [2.49]*
<b>Maori ethnicity</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.406 [9.84]**
<b>Household income \$58,900-\$87,599</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.105 [2.38]*
<b>Household income \$87,600-\$119,999</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.179 [3.40]**
<b>Household income &gt;\$120,000</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.279 [4.92]**
<b>partner retired</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.148 [2.94]**
<b>Opinion of previous govt performance</b> (1 = v. good; 4=v. bad; don't know dropped)	-0.055 [2.38]*
<b>Left-wing ideology</b> (0=no, 1=yes; omitted category "don't know")	-0.828 [17.85]**
<b>Centrist ideology</b> (0=no, 1=yes; omitted category "don't know")	-0.478 [11.86]**
<b>Right-wing ideology</b> (0=no, 1=yes; omitted category "don't know")	-0.509 [9.90]**

Dependent variable: Principal component of Ignorance Measures. 2845 obs, adj R-sq. 0.47

**Table 3: Ignorance and policy preference**

Policy variable	Policy Mean, (Std Dev)	Predicted Ignorance (t-stat)	<b>Residual Ignorance (t-stat)</b>	Left Ideology (t-stat)	Right Ideology (t-stat)	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>
Protect environment even if lowers income (1=yes, 7=no)	3.40 (1.46)	-2.959 (2.15)*	<b>0.014 (0.37)</b>	-1.67 (3.46)**	0.146 (1.63)	0.12
GM foods relatively safe (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)	2.93 (1.09)	1.275 (1.10)	<b>0.077 (2.56)*</b>	0.629 (1.55)	-0.231 (3.22)**	0.11
Death penalty reinstatement (1=strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)	2.70 (1.40)	0.354 (0.28)	<b>-0.259 (7.59)**</b>	0.426 (0.95)	-0.273 (3.32)**	0.20
Tax and redistribution (1=more redistrib; 7=less)	4.14 (1.60)	0.701 (0.46)	<b>-0.113 (2.70)**</b>	-0.457 (0.86)	0.737 (7.43)**	0.19
Environmental spending (1=much more; 5=much less)	2.52 (0.77)	-1.198 (1.67)	<b>-0.044 (2.25)*</b>	-0.65 (2.58)**	0.063 (1.35)	0.12
Health spending (1=much more; 5=much less)	1.86 (0.73)	-0.307 (0.45)	<b>-0.097 (5.33)**</b>	-0.144 (0.60)	0.072 (1.66)	0.09
Defence spending (1=much more; 5=much less)	2.73 (0.97)	1.273 (1.38)	<b>-0.027 (1.08)</b>	0.835 (2.57)*	-0.176 (2.97)**	0.12
Assist low income families (1=much more; 5=much less)	2.48 (0.99)	-0.158 (0.19)	<b>-0.085 (3.77)**</b>	-0.267 (0.90)	0.197 (3.63)**	0.28
Reduce taxes in general (1=strongly support; 5=strongly oppose)	2.13 (0.97)	0.071 (0.08)	<b>-0.086 (3.63)**</b>	0.487 (1.55)	-0.367 (6.44)**	0.19
Work for unemployment benefits (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)	2.18 (1.01)	1.506 (1.55)	<b>-0.109 (4.35)**</b>	0.911 (2.68)	-0.173 (2.84)**	0.15
Welfare makes people lazy and dependent (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)	2.41 (1.17)	1.543 (1.42)	<b>-0.13 (4.48)**</b>	1.011 (2.66)**	-0.26 (3.74)**	0.17
Big business has too much power (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)	2.52 (1.03)	-0.987 (1.03)	<b>-0.102 (4.09)**</b>	-0.694 (2.07)*	0.336 (5.61)**	0.21
Trade unions have too much power (1=strongly agree; 5=strongly disagree)	3.13 (0.97)	0.622 (0.66)	<b>-0.033 (1.34)</b>	0.547 (1.64)	-0.218 (3.71)**	0.12



# Economic thinking

- “There should be a law to further reduce pay differences between women and men”
- “High income tax makes people less willing to work hard”
- “The government should control wages / prices by law; introduce import controls”
- “Immigration is good for the NZ economy”
- “Minimum wages reduce the creation of new jobs”
- “The government should provide a job for everyone who wants one.”

**Table 4: Understanding economics.**

<b>Political ignorance measure</b> (Mean zero, sd 1; increasing measure)	-0.221 [8.77]**		
<b>Residual ignorance measure</b>		-0.22 [8.74]**	-0.22 [8.76]**
<b>Predicted ignorance measure</b>			-0.88 [0.97]
<b>Have internet</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.167 [3.47]**	0.193 [4.02]**	0.089 [0.75]
<b>gender of respondent</b> (0=female, 1=male)	0.269 [6.50]**	0.319 [7.76]**	0.121 [0.58]
<b>Some tertiary education</b> (0=no, 1=yes; less than secondary omitted)	0.109 [2.42]*	0.139 [3.08]**	0.021 [0.16]
<b>University educated</b> (0=no, 1=yes; less than secondary omitted)	0.362 [6.14]**	0.447 [7.70]**	0.106 [0.30]
<b>Home owner</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.116 [2.30]*	0.13 [2.56]*	0.076 [1.02]
<b>European ethnicity</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.135 [2.43]*	0.16 [2.88]**	0.06 [0.51]
<b>Maori ethnicity</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.335 [6.10]**	-0.421 [7.81]**	-0.075 [0.21]
<b>Household income \$87,600-\$119,999</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.125 [1.84]	0.166 [2.44]*	0.004 [0.02]
<b>High household income</b> (0=no; 1= income > \$120,000)	0.421 [5.82]**	0.483 [6.69]**	0.238 [0.91]
<b>Opinion of previous govt performance</b> (1=very good; 4 = very bad; don't know dropped)	-0.073 [2.30]*	-0.06 [1.89]	-0.113 [1.80]
<b>Left-wing ideology</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	-0.155 [3.20]**	-0.079 [1.65]	-0.384 [1.21]
<b>Right-wing ideology</b> (0=no, 1=yes)	0.117 [2.21]*	0.123 [2.32]*	0.098 [1.68]
<b>State of the economy</b> (1=very good; 5 = very bad)	-0.004 [0.15]	-0.004 [0.15]	-0.004 [0.15]
<b>Current household financial situation vs last year</b> (1= a lot better ; 5 = a lot worse)	-0.029 [1.51]	-0.029 [1.51]	-0.028 [1.50]
<b>Expectation for national economy next year</b> (1= a lot better ; 5 = a lot worse)	0.085 [3.55]**	0.085 [3.55]**	0.086 [3.57]**
Absolute value of t-statistics in brackets; * sig at 5%; ** sig at 1%; N=2323 and adjusted R-squared 0.31 in all specifications			





# Correlates of economic thinking

Ignorance	-0.22 (8.77)**
Male	0.27 (6.50)**
University	0.36 (6.14)**
Maori ethnicity	-0.34 (6.10)**
European ethnicity	0.14 (2.43)*
High income	0.42 (5.82)**
Left wing	-0.16 (3.20)**
Right wing	0.12 (2.21)**
N=2323; R <sup>2</sup> =0.31	

### Ignorance and Voting Behavior

Dependent Variable	Ignorance coefficient (z-statistic)	Econ Index coefficient (z-stat)	Left wing ideology (z-stat)	Right-wing (z-stat)	Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>
Not voting (0=voted in 2005; 1= didn't)	1.4% (5.02)**	0.3% (1.40)	-0.7% (1.33)	-1.5% (2.36)*	0.24
Voted Labour	3% (2.01)*	-2.5% (2.08)*	20.6% (7.42)**	-21.6% (6.31)**	0.25
Voted National	0.9% (0.80)	4.5% (4.63)**	-22.1% (10.75)**	19.7% (7.42)**	0.44
Voted Green	-1.2% (3.14)**	-0.1% (0.44)	6% (6.44)**	-2.6% (2.61)**	0.23
Voted ACT	0% (0.66)	-0.1% (0.07)	(dropped)	0.3% (0.89)	0.24
Voted NZ First	-0.1% (0.24)	-1% (2.42)*	-3.2% (3.73)**	-1.9% (2.14)*	0.11
Voted United Future	-0.3% (2.90)**	-0.1% (0.98)	-0.4% (2.40)*	-0.4% (2.45)*	0.31
Voted Maori	-0.3% (1.50)	-0.3% (2.04)*	0.4% (0.91)	-0.4% (1.05)	0.40



# Cueing Results

- 29 specifications
  - 12 cases where cueing group membership augments ignorance
    - 1 significant
  - 17 cases where cueing group membership attenuates ignorance
    - 1 significant



# Discussion

- Political ignorance matters
- Cueing helps little
- Ignorance itself as a demographic characteristic with particular interests?